

Mercury in Ducks on the Great Salt Lake

Questions and Answers

Q: How many Northern shoveler and common goldeneyes are on the Great Salt Lake currently?

A: As of late September, 47,000, or less than 10 percent, of the 487,000 ducks on the state's waterfowl management areas and the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge were Northern shoveler. Common goldeneyes have not been found on recent surveys.

Q: When do common goldeneyes typically arrive at the Great Salt Lake?

A: In mid-November.

Q: How likely is it that I will harvest either a Northern shoveler or a common goldeneye?

A: Northern shoveler amount to 7.5 percent of the ducks harvested in Utah, but they are more prevalent in the harvest from mid-October through mid-December. Common goldeneye represent about 2 percent of the ducks harvested in Utah, and most are taken after ice-up, which typically happens at the end of November.

Q: Can I identify these two species on the wing before I shoot?

A: Yes. Check out the 2005 Utah Waterfowl Proclamation for a good illustration of a shoveler. A photo of a common goldeneye is available on the Web at dwrcdc.nr.utah.gov/ucdc.

Northern shoveler are a medium-sized duck that show a large, powder-blue shoulder patch on their wing. Their large, spoon-shaped bill is also a good identifying characteristic.

The wings of common goldeneyes make a distinct whistling sound when they fly, making this species easy to identify in flight. They also have a distinct white patch on their cheek and lots of white in their wings.

Q: Although it is recommended that I don't shoot either Northern shoveler or common goldeneye, what happens if I do harvest those ducks?

A: The harvested duck must be retrieved and taken into your possession, transported from the hunting area, and counts as part of your bag limit and possession limit. Hunters should not shoot a shoveler or goldeneye unless they're willing to eat the duck. By state law, the DWR cannot allow hunters to waste game.

Q: What about the other ducks species I may shoot during this hunting season. Are they safe to eat?

A: Many other species of ducks show some evidence of mercury, but at levels below the EPA's 0.3 parts per million screening level. Don't eat Northern shoveler or common goldeneye.

Q: Could eating Northern shoveler or common goldeneyes truly harm me?

A: Yes. Long-term consumption is believed to be particularly harmful. Mercury that could be ingested by eating these two duck species can build-up to unacceptable levels and will stay in your body for a long time, possibly impairing your brain and other body functions.

Q: Where has the DWR collected ducks so far?

A: All of the ducks that have been tested were collected from the marshes along the south arm of the Great Salt Lake in Weber, Davis, Salt Lake and Tooele counties.

Q: Are ducks on other areas of the lake also affected by mercury?

A: The DWR isn't certain yet. Ducks are migratory, so it's possible that ducks from the south arm of the Great Salt Lake will fly to other areas of the lake during the hunting season.

Q: What are the next steps in the DWR's sampling efforts?

A: The DWR will collect ducks throughout this fall and winter. Different species of ducks will be collected, and they'll be collected from areas across the Great Salt Lake. The DWR will keep the public informed about the results of future testing.